

Alvin Todd

“The Dahlia Man”

Introduction

August 2018

When Alvin Todd came to Union Co GA from Clarke Co. in 1925 he not only found a ready source of fresh collard greens to be trucked to the Atlanta Farmer's Market, he found Zura Gooch and married her 12 weeks later! They lived in Suches for 1 year then in Athens 1 year. Then in 1927 back to Suches GA until 1980.

Alvin died in 1988. In memory of his lifelong contributions to these mountain communities and much of its seasonal beauty through the years, the Union County Historical Society would like to take the occasion of his 30 years passing to honor and thank him.

His descendants and extended family would like to thank the Historical Society for their efforts and all those who have enjoyed his dahlias since the early 1930's. Today you can see dahlias planted in many yards as you drive through the county and in places like Meeks Park, Brannon Lodge in Blairsville and Woody Gap School in Suches. Many of these are Alvin's original dahlias that he developed and named.

The family would also like to thank the Atlanta Journal and Constitution, their photographers, journalists, and many other magazines, papers and writers, who were instrumental in helping to put “Todd's Dahlia Farm”, “Lost Hollow” and Suches, GA on the map. Many became good friends and Alvin even named some of his dahlias after them.

Alvin & Zura were more than dahlia farmers. His green thumb and her business acumen worked well side by side for more than 62 years. The things contained in this writing, though short & sweet, are family memories and stories

treasured by all. Maybe a couple of them will tickle your innards too, at least make you smile.

### Alvin Todd 1902-1988

Growing vegetables to truck to the market was a good way to make a tolerable living in the GA mountains in the 20's. So when the family came back to Suches in 1927 they started doing just that. However in 1928 the Irish Potato Blight wiped out many people's way of making a living and for some, what they were going to eat thru the winter. Many, including Alvin, were facing very hard choices of what to do to just get by. That fall, Alvin's mother -in-law Mrs. Julie Gooch, gave him about 100 dahlia bulbs from her yard & garden that she had grown. In 1929 Alvin started marketing these flower bulbs by taking many blooms every year to County Fairs and Flower Shows, even to Rich's in Atlanta and Lenox Square. And the rest is History! By 1970 when Alvin & Zura sold the farm & business, he was planting as many as 65,000 bulbs every year for sale in the USA, Canada, Holland, Germany, England, Formosa & beyond.

Mr. Todd also raised some cattle & grew corn. In the mid 40's he helped the Univ. of Georgia Agriculture Research station to grow & experiment with new hybrid corn seed and became one of the first members of the Georgia 100 Bushel Corn Club and Georgia's 10 year Corn Club. He also had one of the first corn combines in Union County.

Alvin and Zura also raised a few chickens to sell a few eggs. People said he was wrong to make chickens live in a log chicken house he built them. But they really believed he was crazy when he put electric lights in the chicken house until he was the only one anywhere around to have fresh eggs to go in their Christmas cakes.

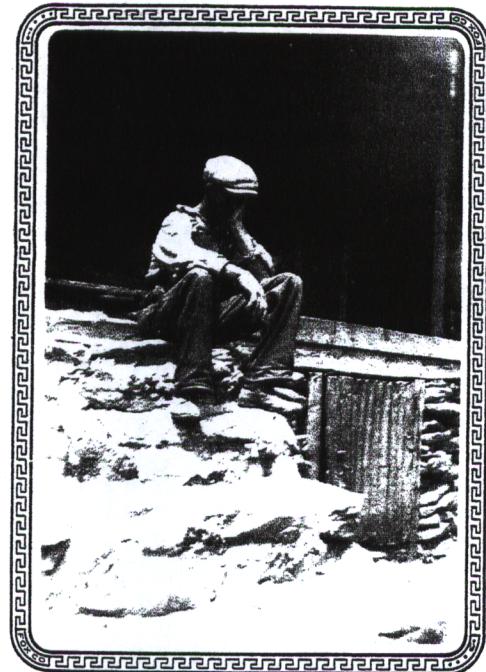
For 40 years Alvin was an ordained Deacon of the Baptist Church, Justice of the Peace in Union County, and the Polling Officer in the Gaddistown District. Even after the farm was sold they did not stop farming. They grew Christmas trees in Suches for 10 years, then moved just north of Dahlonega and grew

blueberries until his death in 1988. No matter where he lived or what else he might have to do, he always had several dahlias to tend to. Three of his kids grew dahlias and today 3 of his grandkids grow them, some to sell, some to give away, and some to enjoy.

July 1925 – Alvin & Zura - their second date-  
12 weeks later they were married.

1928- The day Alvin knew the blight had wiped out his potato crop.

His brother happened to be visiting from Athens & took this picture.



Learn as you go!

In 1929 when Great Grandmother Gooch gave Alvin those first bulbs, he already knew how to divide them, but he taught himself by trial & error the finer points of dividing them so as to get the most out of every clump. If not divided right you could only throw them to the cattle... they loved them! He worked on

soil fertilization, planting, digging & storing . "Dig or lay off the furrows wide & deep", was his rule. Thank the Lord, rainfall was always more than adequate & soil basics were very good, as were the cool summer nights. Winter storage he learned was best in dark, dry places in sand, with only very minimum moisture allowed. Alvin found that with the first year's planting you knew if the plant would stand without being staked. Most dahlia plants are strong enough naturally and he never staked them in the field. But it takes at least 4 years planting to determine if a bloom will stay true enough to name and add to your sales list. Some flowers would be beautiful with the first ones opening, yet later blooms less so as the season progressed. Some multicolored ones will even drop a color after the first flowers open. Some that are multicolored after a few years will start blooming a solid color on the same plant. If the solid color proves itself you call it a 'sport' and come up with a name. However, some of these tend to go back & forth from solid to multicolored. Some bulbs will dry rot no matter what you do. Alvin learned a lot of this the hard way!!

To begin with there were no plant diseases nor pests to damage the dahlias. Later on Alvin had to start spraying for worms that eat the blooms, and Japanese Beetles are very bad to eat the blooms and spraying alone will not stop them. Bugs need to be pinched off most every day! Bumblebees do most of the pollinating so spraying needs to be done late in the day. When the blooms die, you pull them off & dry them completely, so you can harvest the seeds. That's how you get new varieties. Which was Alvin's favorite dahlia? He always answered, "The one I'm looking at." We know that he was a little partial to the big dark ones, and Zura liked the little round ones called "pom-poms."

#### "Other than Dahlias"

#### School

Alvin could read, figure math easy and remember everything even as a kid. But Alvin could not write. Alvin would sit down to write, even with help he could not put words down on paper to write a sentence. He was very frustrated by this & told his Dad he wanted to quit school. His Dad told Alvin he would have to work hard & Alvin said OK. Little did he know that it would serve him very well. He only

finished 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and even when he was grown & much older, he resisted writing letters, even to family and was never thrilled about it. Otherwise, Grandma Zura did the writing.

### Prayer Routine and Deacon

Alvin was a man of prayer even before he was an ordained Baptist Deacon. I don't remember seeing him say the Blessing over breakfast, but he did over all other meals, especially Sunday dinner after church. At bedtime, every night, he would get on his knees by the side of his bed & pray for everybody & everything. When his knees would no longer do the job, he would sit on the foot of his bed for Bible reading, meditation, and prayer. He was Ordained in the 1930's at the Valley Church in Suches, GA under the guidance of Preacher Ed Grizzle, and served as Deacon where ever he was for more than 40 years. Alvin always honored Our Lord even when someone pointed a gun at him.

### Favorite Hobby

Grandpa didn't have a whole lot of time on his hands at any season. The dahlia business was always a year round job. Many friends from the Suches community helped divide the dahlia clumps in the Winter, help plant them in the Spring, & dig in the Fall. But when he did have some time it was almost always at night when he would read his Bible first, then his other two favorite things, the Readers Digest and the National Geographic. He read every copy of both magazines & was still subscribing & reading both when he died in 1988. After he passed my Dad, Marion, got the National Geographics. They were later donated to the school system ( except the Sept. 1959 issue which we will keep.)

### Moon Landing

As much as Alvin loved reading, and he did prefer things that would teach you something, and as much as he learned during his life, he still had issues with the Moon Landing in 1969. He always watched the evening news so he knew

everything that led up to the actual moon shot. He, Grandma & I stayed up that night to see the moon landing on T.V. Yet he would still, for some time afterwards say, "I just don't know if that really happened, a man landing on the Moon and walking around, I just don't know about that." It took some time for him to come around . Hearing the men telling everything about it after they returned and the fact that there were many pictures and planning for the next one..... he finally came around but it took a while. (et)

#### Polling Officer

Alvin was Union County's Voter Polling Officer in the Gaddistown District for 40 years. Before the County built a little concrete building on Gaddistown Rd, Grandpa would use his truck for people to come by and vote. He would even park it in the forks of the road so he would be easy to find. More than once Grandma would have to 'man the poll' so Grandpa could go work in the fields. She would take bushel baskets of green beans she needed to can, & break them until Grandpa came back. "Security"? That was easy, Grandma always carried a small pistol in the pocket of her big apron!

#### Justice of the Peace

Along with being 'Polling Officer' for 40 years, Alvin was also Justice of the Peace for 40 years. From 1936-1976 the 10 terms of 4 years each he served, kept him in demand. Residents of Sarah, GA later called Suches, would bring any number of differences or disputes to Alvin to see if they could be worked out under the law. Even on days when the public was visiting & the AJC was coming to make pictures of the dahlias blooming, someone in the Community would need him to listen to a problem. Being a Church Deacon and a sworn officer, people tended to trust Alvin. The summer of 1969 I stayed at the Dahlia Farm to help out. On two occasions people came to the house so Alvin could hear their grievances. Right there in the front yard, Grandpa would tell me to sit down in the grass & listen. I don't remember what either testimony was about, I was only 14. After he listened to them & made some notes on the back of a dahlia price

list, he took the applicable law book in one hand and his Bible in the other hand and consulted both of them. In both 'hearings' he would propose a solution that not only the law provided for, and the Bible confirmed! And both parties accepted! I don't think very many of his solutions were ever appealed. (et)

### Shipping Boxes

When Grandpa first started shipping bulbs that people ordered he used whatever he had, especially shoe boxes. He would also get boxes from the grocery store in Dahlonega and all the small stores and gas stations in and around Suches. When he needed more, he started collecting cereal boxes from all the neighbors and 'building' them into whatever size he needed. Finally, his sister Elsie's husband, who lived on the west side of Atlanta, had a friend who purchased a box factory. Imagine that!! Mr. Hall provided Alvin with all the boxes he could use, any size, any amount he wanted for many years.

### Electrical Cords

Us grandkids would occasionally spend weekends with Grandma & Grandpa and help them with whatever they had to do. Grandma & Grandpa both being very thrifty, they saved everything. Not long after they had moved to Dahlonega, I was helping Grandpa straighten up in his storage shed. In one corner there was a VERY LARGE pile of electrical cords all tangled up, so I asked him what happened? He said he had the cords running from one building to the other for extra lighting so he could work at night. A few days later he put a little wagon behind the lawn mower to move some stuff and forgot the cords were stretched across the yard. The cords were black or green & he did not see them. They were caught by the tires of the wagon and tangled in a gosh awful mess! He even had to take one tire off to get the mess off the axel. He said he was tired of trying to get them untangled and was just going to cut the ends off of them & wire some new ends back on or maybe just throw the whole pile away! I convinced him to let me try to help him, but he didn't believe anyone could help that mess, but he

said 'okay'. I worked on it 4 hrs, he did check on me a time or two and watched a little bit each time, but he still could not believe I got them all straightened out! He was thrilled!! (et)

#### Final Thoughts

In 2010 the Union County GA Historical Society participated in the creation of an arm of endeavor to honor the contributions of farming and agriculture, both past & present, & its growth and continued prosperity within Union County. The Union County Farmer's Market was established and Alvin Todd was one of the first three farmers inducted into their "Agriculture Hall of Fame", most specifically for growing dahlias. And as the old saying goes 'behind every good man is a good woman'. Zura's teaching experiences before their marriage helped in raising their six children, and her natural business sense made their 'Dahlia Buisness' a little easier for Alvin. Without her it would not have been so amazing. The work was hard but good, and it was all year long too. After they were a little older they did do some traveling, but not much.

The two men who bought the farm & business in 1970, sold the dahlias a few years and then sold the land in 1979. The family who purchased the land in Lost Hollow in 1979 have welcomed our Todd family to visit anytime and we will always be grateful. Sometimes it is so very good to just be able to stand on that piece of land and remember.



Four acres of dahlias in full bloom 1966



Dahlias on display in the 'flower room' 1966

Alvin D. Todd  
"The Dahlia Man"  
1902-1988

When Alvin Todd came to Union County from Clark County in 1925, he not only found a source of fresh collard greens to be trucked to the Atlanta Farmer's Market, he found Zura Gooch and married her 12 weeks later. Her teaching experience and business "sense" not only helped in raising 6 kids but also became invaluable for their dahlias and Christmas trees in Suches where they lived for 55 years.

After his potato crop failed in 1928, his mother-in-law gave him some dahlia bulbs (tubers) and in 1929 he started marketing them. By 1970, he was planting as many as 65,000 bulbs for sale in the USA, Canada, Holland, Germany, England, and Formosa. But Alvin was more than just a dahlia farmer. He was one of the first members of the Georgia 100 Bushel Corn Club and Georgia 10 Year Corn Club. When he put light bulbs in his chicken house in the wintertime to keep the hens laying eggs, everybody said he was crazy!

For 40 years, he was an ordained deacon of the Baptist faith, Justice of the Peace in Union County, and the county's voter polling officer in the Suches community. Even after the dahlia farm was sold, Alvin and Zura did not stop farming. They grew Christmas trees in Suches for 10 years and then moved to Dahlonega and grew blueberries until his death in 1988.

There is no room here to tell all of the things he did in his life, but for a man who intentionally quit school after the third grade he has made quite the influence on Suches, Georgia and Union County.